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## ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a vulnerable period of life; teens are faced with challenging issues such as stress and suicide. Facilitating informed decision-making among adolescents requires educational programs that present information in compelling and credible ways. With this in mind, a peer education program was developed, using older students to teach younger students. Peer educators, sometimes referred to as paraprofessionals, are defined as students trained to offer services or programs to their peers. Peer education can provide a cost-effective way of providing additional small group instruction to augment regular curricular offerings. A psychology class of 31 seniors was trained during 10 45-minute class periods to educate the 214 sophomores at Perkiomen Valley high school during a one and one-half hour long workshop. A majority of the peer educators reported that this experience increased their self-confidence, understanding of stress management, knowledge of suicide, and feelings of helpfulness. The sophomores' perceptions of the program suggested that this type of experience was of value to them. Many indicated that peer education should be offered again. Contains five references. (JBJ)

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### Abstract

Adolescence is a vulnerable period of life; teens are faced with challenging issues such as stress and suicide. Facilitating informed decision-making among adolescents requires educational programs that present information in compelling and credible ways. With this in mind, a peer education program was developed, using older students to teach younger students. A class of 31 seniors was trained to educate the 214 sophomores at Perkiomen Valley high school during a one and one half hour long workshop. Two post program evaluations showed positive effects for both the senior peer educators and their sophomore workshop students.

Peer education programs are becoming increasing popular. Peer educators, sometimes referred to as paraprofessionals, are defined as students trained to offer services or programs to their peers (Fennell, 1993). Most peer education programs focus on health related issues such as drug and alcohol use, stress management, and sexuality. Peer education programs that succeed long-term adapt to changing environments, cultural mores, fluctuating economies, and societal and health concerns (Edelstein & Goyner, 1993). Peer education can provide a cost-effective way of providing additional small group instruction to augment regular curricular offerings.

These programs are based on the assumption that often students are more comfortable with a peer rather than a teacher or professional, and as a result, be more responsive to material presented by peers. In addition, research indicates that young people (ages 15-24) are more likely to listen to a speaker with whom they can identify" (Klien, Sondag, & Drolet, 1994). Since many young people use language in distinctive ways, instructors who share students' parlance may communicate more effectively. Material may be easier to understand if it is explained by a peer who can use familiar terms.

In investigating whether an AIDS peer education program would change first year college students' behaviors, Richie and Getty (1994), found that classroom exposure to the peer-led program was associated with increased HIV-antibody testing and condom use, and stated intentions of reducing HIV-related behaviors. Other studies have illustrated that peer education programs are effective in reducing alcohol use across a variety of settings and cultures

(Perry, Grant, Ernberg, Florenzano, Langdon, Myeni et. al., 1989).

Unfortunately, only a minimal amount of research concerning peer education exists. Few studies have investigated how successful programs have been in changing attitudes and behaviors. The purpose of the following study was to evaluate whether senior peer educators and their sophomore students perceived a peer education program to be valuable for them.

#### Method

A training manual for the peer education program was written by the first two authors of this study. It was divided into four modules, each conveying a different topic which was believed to be relevant and influential to a young high school student's life. The modules were: (1) strategies for effective communication, (2) communication differences between the sexes, (3) strategies for handling stress, and (4) suicide prevention and intervention.

Training of a high school psychology class of 31 seniors was conducted by the authors of the manual. Training sessions were conducted during ten, 45 minute class periods. After completion of the training, the peer educators were given the chance to choose the topics they would teach the school's sophomore class (214 students). The peer educators decided that teaching about the causes of stress, ways of dealing with stress, how to improve social skills, and suicide prevention and intervention were most important. The senior students then broke up into teams consisting of three to four students. Each team was to be responsible for developing a way to present the material to a group of sophomores

(who were grouped based on their homeroom). The actual workshop took place on a Wednesday afternoon and lasted for one and one half hour.

#### Study I

A brief seven item, anonymous, self-report questionnaire was administered to the Perkiomen Valley high school senior peer educators after the completion of the workshop. The questionnaire investigated, using a Likert type scale, trainers' level of agreement or disagreement as to whether participating as a trainer increased their self-confidence, understanding of stress management and suicide, and feelings of helpfulness, and whether it changed their behavior as a student.

#### Study II

An anonymous evaluation, consisting of five self-report questions, was administered to all of the sophomores during the final ten minutes of the workshop period. The purpose of this evaluation was to investigate sophomores' perceptions of the value of the peer education program (based on a five point Likert type scale). The students were also questioned as to whether they had any suggestions for improvement of the workshop and/or the presenters, if the program should be offered again, and if they would like additional training on any of the topics.

### Results

#### Study I

A majority (64%) of the peer educators reported that this experience increased their self-confidence. Most trainers (76%)

indicated that their understanding of stress management had increased as a result of the program. The data also suggested that most trainers (84%) felt that their understanding of suicide improved. Feelings of helpfulness among the majority of the seniors (76%) were also increased by way of their participation in the peer education program. A desire to participate in this type of program again was expressed by a large majority of the class (84%). Almost half (48%) reported that their own student behavior had changed as a function of their participation as an educator.

Responses to the open-ended item about ways the program could be improved indicated that there was a strong feeling of unpreparedness. Of the 24 seniors who filled out the evaluations, 16 (66%) of them indicated additional practice time was needed.

#### Study II

A majority of the sophomores (60%), indicated on the evaluations that they found the content of the presentation to be of value. A large majority (88.6%), indicated that this peer education program should be offered again. However, most sophomores (74.1%), responded they would not like additional training on the same topics covered during the workshop. Oneway ANOVA were conducted on each of the three variables (value, desire for repetition of workshop, and extra desire for additional training) by group. The purpose of this was to investigate differences in student responses across the separate peer educator groups presenting the material. There was no significant effect of peer educator group on any of the three variables. One way to

interpret this is to see the results as indicating that the groups were successfully trained to present material in a homogeneous manner, and therefore presented the workshop consistently so that it had similar impact on sophomores in all the workshop groups.

### Discussion

The evaluations, indicate that the experience of participating as a peer educator had a positive effect on most of the senior trainers. There was a general trend toward reported increase in self-confidence, understanding of stress management, knowledge of suicide, and feelings of helpfulness. The seniors also expressed motivation to participate in a program like this again.

The sophomores' perceptions of the program, as measured by the evaluations, suggested that this type of experience was of value to them. Many indicated that a peer education program should be offered again. While there was a lack of desire for further training on these topics, perhaps this suggests that they received an adequate amount of information during the workshop period.

Our results suggest that future attempts at conducting a peer education program such as this should allow student educators more time to prepare their presentations for the underclassmen, and to practice in groups before the workshop period. The trainers' evaluations showed a desire for greater rehearsal. Many speculated that if they had had more time, they would have been better prepared, thus enabling them to give a stronger presentation.

In conclusion, it can be seen that a program involving senior high school students educating younger peers can have both a

positive and influential impact on not only the educated, but the  
educators as well.

Please respond to each question by indicating the degree to which you either agree or disagree with the statement. A response of 1 would represent strongly disagree, 2 somewhat disagree, 3 neutral, 4 somewhat agree, and 5 strongly agree.

1. Did serving as a trainer increase your self-confidence.

1           2           3           4           5           6

2. Did serving as a trainer increase your understanding of stress management?

1           2           3           4           5           6

3. Did serving as a trainer improve your understanding of suicide?

1           2           3           4           5           6

4. Did serving as a trainer make you feel helpful to others?

1           2           3           4           5           6

5. Would you like the chance to participate in this kind of program again?

1           2           3           4           5           6

6. Did participating as a peer educator change your behavior as a student? i.e. You may participate in class more frequently.

1           2           3           4           5           6

7. Would you please share any ideas you have about how this program could be improved?

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